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ABSTRACT

The full text of a speech regarding opportunities for adults to earn high school completion credentials, delivered to the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, is presented in the document. The GED program is described in terms of its testing validity and age restrictions. It is stated that although the GED testing approach is a useful one, it is not a universal testing tool because of the stress placed upon reading competency. Adult high schools are discussed in terms of the Policies and Standards for the Approval of Separately Administered Adult High Schools developed by the NCA. It is felt that these standards will allow flexibility and experimentation among member schools, but at the same time provide effective quality controls. Sixteen separately administered adult high schools were accredited in 1974, and a seven year cycle of research and evaluation will be necessary to assess the NCA Standards in action. (LH)

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NCA STANDARDS FOR ADULT HIGH SCHOOLS: FOSTERING DIVERSITY AND QUALITY IN ADULT SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Throughout the nineteen-state region served by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, interest continues to grow in the provision of opportunities for adults to earn their high school completion credential. In Illinois, for example, the state constitution adopted in 1970 calls for the provision of education through the secondary level for all Illinois residents, regardless of their age. A bill is now before the Illinois legislature revising the school code to eliminate the specification of age eighteen as the student age at which the state responsibility to provide secondary education ends.

Community colleges throughout the North Central Association region and throughout the United States are vigorously recruiting adult students who have not yet earned a high school diploma or a GED equivalency certificate.

Both secondary and nominally postsecondary institutions are showing a strong interest in this area. There is disagreement within the educational community as to whether such programs are best offered by high schools or by community colleges. Studies indicate the costs are considerably less when the programs are mounted by secondary-level educators. Perhaps there is need

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for offerings at both levels.

The GED Program

It would be useful to review the provisions that have been developed to serve adults who lack a high school diploma and who want to continue with their formal education or who want to earn a credential to enable them to qualify for employment.

The GED program was developed to serve returning servicemen who had dropped out of school to enter the armed forces during World War II. The GED program would not have been developed if the typical American high school of that time had had the requisite flexibility to design programs to meet the needs of the returning servicemen. Instead many of the schools seemed incapable of devising ways to enable adults to earn a high school diploma without collecting sixteen units of credit by attending classes at the rate of 120 hours of attendance for each unit.

Adults resented the fact that their experience was entirely disregarded by educational authorities who passed judgment on their academic history. Further, they had observed accelerated training in effect in the military and had become impatient with the somewhat leisurely pace of average high school programs that were designed primarily for the typical adolescent. Therefore, many of them were pleased to take advantage of a testing system that would enable them to earn a high school equivalency certificate without being required to keep a chair warm for a given number of hours and that was tailored to their more mature years.

Those who were promoting the GED approach were fully aware of the claim that they were offering a "second-rate credential." Accordingly they used a variety of methods to counter that claim.

Age restrictions were imposed, in different states at different ages, so that on the average anyone who earned a GED certificate would have to be older than nearly all those who had earned a high school diploma by uninterrupted attendance at elementary and secondary schools. This age requirement made it a bit more likely that the holder of a GED certificate would be more mature than the youngest of the diploma holders.

The age restriction is not sound in logic, however, though it may be compelling politically. If the test measures one's general educational development, there is no defensible logical educational reason to prohibit persons of any age from taking it. However, if these were done, we would have high school freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors who would earn passing scores on the tests even though they were something less than mature in other dimensions. Yet logically, the test, if it is valid, should be available to anyone who wishes to take it. Nevertheless, educators in general strongly resist this idea, for they question the validity of any single test that pretends to equate with the full high school experience.

A second restriction, intended to safeguard standards, is the use of passing-level minima that are set at a level that an appreciable percentage of high school diploma holders would not be able to meet. That is to say, whatever it is that the GED test measures--and I wish to stress that it certainly is not identical to the requirements for a high school diploma--it is a more restrictive test than are the barriers, requirements, and regulations that go with the protection of the quality of the high school diploma.

However, the GED test itself is now an example of ossification. It assumes that there are competencies that can be spelled out in terms of a battery of questions and that the responses of adults to these questions is a valid measure of the most important aspects of their educational development.

We know, as does the American Council on Education, that reading ability is given undue weight in the present battery of tests. Accordingly, the battery is being revised so that those tests that are supposed to measure educational development in natural sciences, in social studies, and in mathematics are not biased toward those candidates with superior competence in correctness and effectiveness of expression and interpretation of literary material. When the new test battery becomes available in 1977 or 1978, it should be a more valid measure of the separate abilities it purports to measure. So even though the GED testing approach is useful for some specific purposes, it is not a universal tool.

Separately Administered Adult High Schools

Many secondary schools throughout the United States now attempt to make programs available to adults lacking a high school diploma. At the simplest level this activity consists of offering the regular high school curriculum at times adults are available to participate in it. Under Standard XII of the NCA Policies and Standards for the Approval of Secondary Schools 1974-75, high school diploma completion programs must "encompass characteristics consistent with the more mature needs, interests, opportunities, and responsibilities of adults. Courses of study shall reflect in depth and content the intellectual, social, vocational and emotional experiences of adults."

Some years ago, the NCA Commission on Schools appointed a committee to examine and to propose standards for separately administered adult high schools. These standards were to establish the preconditions for sound adult secondary educational progress, and to permit member schools the wide range of individual action, experimentation, and flexibility so vital to the continued vigor of adult secondary education, but they were at the same time to provide effective

quality controls.

I believe that the result of those years of work--the Policies and Standards for the Approval of Separately Administered Adult High Schools--has the essential flexibility and clearly encourages experimentation and innovation. More specifically, the standards provide nearly maximum flexibility to the local school district in defining what is meant by a high school education.

Each adult high school is empowered to award credit to entering adult students for:

1. acceptable credits previously earned and documented by school transcripts for grade nine or higher,
2. credits on the basis of prior work training or experience,
3. credits through extension and correspondence study,
4. credit by examination,
5. credit based on GED test scores,
6. credit through military experience,
7. secondary school credits earned in foreign countries,
8. credit from television course work.

After the student has been admitted and his educational history has been examined and recorded, he may earn specific course credit in the following ways:

1. Credit by examination
2. Credit by work experience
3. Credit by independent study programs
4. Credit for adult high school summer study
5. Credit through extension and correspondence study
6. Credit through television course work

Thus, the opportunities for developing programs to meet the needs of

adults are great. As is always the case when considerable freedom is provided, there is the accompanying opportunity to take advantage of that freedom in ways that could seriously lower the quality of the diploma. Yet there is no way to provide increased freedom without at the same time delegating increased responsibility.

I believe that any adult high school that wishes to experiment beyond the very considerable freedom incorporated in the standards has an adequate opportunity to do so. Any adult high school wishing to make substantive deviations from the standards may secure permission to do so by seeking approval from the NCA State Committee. Such a procedure may appear to have been designed to discourage rather than to encourage innovative and unusual programs and designs. However, taking into account the very considerable freedom to innovate that has been written into the standards, it is quite likely that most of what leaders of the separately administered adult high schools would like to do is already permitted or even encouraged. Through the years, the reality of the matter has been that the NCA State Committee, since it is composed of working administrators, is very receptive to any innovative program that appears to meet a specific educational need and has built within it some evaluative controls.

The standards contain some restrictions that are intended to increase the likelihood that high quality programs well suited to the needs of the adult learners will be conducted. Accordingly the standards are concerned with the qualifications of the staff; the adequacy of custodial and clerical services; the relationship of the school to the board of education; conditions of employment; the special needs of handicapped adults; the provision of noncredit offerings; the qualifications of counselors, media personnel, health personnel, and paraprofessionals; student personnel services; inservice training;

learning materials; financial support and control; facilities, equipment, and supplies; and provisions for both continuous evaluation and comprehensive evaluations at least once each seven-year period.

At the 1974 NCA Annual Meeting, the first group of separately-administered adult high schools were accredited. These include one in Colorado, seven in Illinois, one in Iowa, three in Ohio, and four operated in Europe by the United States Department of Defense. How well the Policies and Standards achieve the purposes they were meant to serve will be revealed in the next few years. Not until we have had the opportunity to conduct research and studies and have been able to follow both the acceptance of and the adherence to the standards over at least a seven-year cycle will we be able to make a rigorous assessment of their utility and of their flaws. Without doubt, however, the standards represent a firm foundation.

Because these standards are unique--no other regional has developed standards for this special sector of education--their influence is being felt even beyond the NCA region, for many state departments of education (as well as the federal government) are using the standards as guidelines for developing adult high school programs. These standards represent one tool available to leaders in the field of adult high school education as they address the problems and promises inherent in their task.